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ABSTRACT

The speaker raises questions surrounding the existence of school district crisis policies, relations with law enforcement agencies, relations with the news media, the designation of an official spokesman for the schools, the releasing of information, and the posting of regulations concerning such things as closing hours and fire department regulations where demonstrators can see them. (IRT)

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# STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH BOYCOTTS, VIOLENCE AND SIT-INS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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at . . . Atlantic City
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ED127710

For the life of me I'll never understand why I have been asked to speak on this subject "Strategies for Coping with Boycotts, Violence, and Sit-Ins."

Just because we in Los Angeles have had riots, floods, demonstrations, fires, strikes, walkouts, sit-ins, air crashes on school grounds, student flare-ups over dress codes, murders, vandalism, a strip tease teacher, and a sex test--there really hasn't been any trouble.

On second thought, perhaps we have had a few headline getters. Maybe that's why I'm here. Incidentally, the person who thought up this title and then tapped me for the job must have had a soft spot in his heart. But how can there be a soft spot in stone?



When I was asked to handle this assignment I suggested a better title: "What do you do when the roof falls in?"

My reasoning was that as a public relations person I almost always handled the problems during and after. Although I frequently participated in many of the "before" decisions, I really was not involved in the causes for these flareups.

I have my opinions, and you have yours, as to the "whys" of these problems in education today. My opinions are no better than anyone else's. So what I see as my charge here this afternoon is to bring out some of the yes-yes's and no-no's about violence etc. from a public relations point of view.

In fact, I don't really intend to do that in these few minutes alloted me at the start. Instead, I hope to raise many questions in your minds and those of the panelists.

Then, hopefully, we will come up with some answers during the panel presentations and the audience question and answer period.

Not to say that I don't have a few suggestions--a lot of them, in fact--because you can't live through these trying times without learning something.

Strategies (Introduction)
2-2-2

If you don't think you have a crisis on your hands when an earthquake comes--or anything similar where there is widespread damage, chaos, and confusion--you really haven't experienced all the goodies that school administration and public relations life has to offer.

But really, and unfortunately, these kinds of things have become very much a part of a school man's life these days.

There used to be a saying in this business of ours as you started out each morning: "I wonder if there is going to be any problem facing me today?"

From there it went to something like: "I wonder what the problem will be?"--Today we don't talk about crises on an "if" basis anymore. We now say--"There will be crises--which one should be given top priority."

The earthquake won hands down in our district awhile back. When you get into a predicament like this, things such as sit-ins and strikes are dwarfed.

About the only good thing you can say about an earthquake, however, is that it sure does bring about total community involvement. Whereas some of the other events often split communities, this earthquake type thing brings people together.

Strategies (Introduction)
3-3-3

While you might find people taking sides on strikes and demonstrations--for and against the schools--earthquakes seem to cross all their barriers and put aside prejudices.

We in the Los Angeles City Schools should come out stronger after all th's (I know our buildings will, because we must go for a bond issue).

Now let me go on with the few remarks I had prepared. You will note that they are neatly typed on cards. These were done with shaky hand on the airplane ride here.

3-3-3

Nevertheless, I believe it best that my opening remarks get us to thinking together about what is going on in schools across the nation today. Then we can get down to specifics later.

May I hasten to add that Los Angeles isn't alone in these problems. As president-elect of the National School Public Relations Association last year and president this year, I have been around. The only thing comforting, if such terrible circumstances can elicit comfort, is that I'm not alone in my misery.

It is my guess that you are here because (1) you have had one or more of the troubles listed in the title of today's discussion, or (2) you expect them.

As I mentioned earlier, these things are going on everywhere. And you don't find the answers in books or courses in school administration. Frequently I have wanted to call the school of education where I got my administrative credential to ask for help. But then I decided to leave the poor devils alone.

Proof that school districts have troubles in all parts of this nation is all around us. You only need to read the newspapers and watch television to find that out. (Someday the school districts that do not have problems will make the news headlines, but don't hold your breath. Top billing to negative items and unhappy experiences is here to stay, I'm afraid.)

4-4-4

Also, opinion polls tell us that the number one problem bugging the school publics is that of discipline (or call it what you want). The recent Gallup poll as conducted by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation and reported in the October issue of the Phi Delta Kappan is a good example of how people feel toward the public schools today.

Now before you jump all over me--as some secondary school principals did to the Kettering people in Houston last month--I'm merely reporting what the opinion poll said people think is wrong. They (the people) may be off their nut as far as some of us might feel, but what they "think" is something else again.

But don't get me started on that subject--that is an entire speech. Suffice to say, the persons questioned in the Gallup poll cite discipline as the greatest problem of the schools in their own communities. Not finances, good teachers, or drugs--but discipline. Although a definition of discipline was not given, you and I know that the public views almost anything negative in schools as a lack of discipline.

Perhaps you won't agree with that. Perhaps you won't agree with opinion polls. But I'll bet you will agree on one thing--we do have problems.

And I guess that's why you and I are here.

5-5-5

When trouble strikes--whether you are prepared for it or not--you probably will say to yourself, "How the hell did I ever get into this work?" Or you say, "I'm going to quit."

You, the professional educators out there and up here, don't. And we the professional public relations practitioners out there and here, don't. So let's get on with the show.

I'd like to ask a few questions and then perhaps we can come up with some answers a little later. Not that I personally have answers to all the questions I'll be asking--but I certainly have some. As I mentioned earlier, you don't get all these battle scars for nothing.

(1) How important do you think it is to have a school district policy (or plan of action, if you will)? In football they call it a game plan. But of course this is serious business and we are not playing games.

Maybe a written policy might be misinterpreted by the "bad guys" and cause more problems than it would solve. This policy could fall into the "enemy's" hands, you know.

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6-6-6

Do you think the best way to handle the situation is to wait until something happens; then "play it by ear" as they say, or even "fly by the seat of your pants?"

Perhaps it isn't important to put all employees, students, offices, schools and the public on notice as to our expectations when trouble occurs.

We can kick these questions around later. The answers are basic as far as planning strategy is concerned. And once again I want to make it clear that I will only be discussing what to do when the roof falls in. Like I said earlier, I too am interested in preventing these things and solving all the problems, but the charge here today is how do we work out of these bad situations from a public relations viewpoint.

(2) What do you do as far as law enforcement is concerned when you have these disorders descend upon you? Do you contact them in advance? Do you draw up ground rules?

Or is it better to forget all this in advance of trouble and just wait until something happens? Or do you think it best never to involve law enforcement under any conditions. Is this good or bad community relations?

If you call the police, that will bring the news media. Let's tackle that one next.

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7-7-7

(3) So the press, radio, and television show up. What do you do? Throw them off campus or out of the buildings? Or have them arrested?

I can assure you that the media will be there and in force. Do you just ignore them and expect (or hope) they go away?

Do you suppose no story will appear in the press or on television if you keep quiet or refuse to give out information? Would you think the presence of cameras and television trucks might cause more trouble? What do you do about that?

(4) Who does the speaking for the schools and the administration? Do you leave it all up to the principal? Is it desirable to have several spokesmen?

What authority is given the spokesman if he or she is not the superintendent? Would you suggest that the superintendent stay away from the trouble spot, or would it be better to have him on television talking to the pickets or others involved in the trouble?

8-8-8

(5) What kind of information should be available about the school district generally or the school affected in particular? Would it be a good idea to have information ready in advance--size of school, number of teachers, costs, etc.?

And what type of information should you share with employees or students or community not involved in the disturbances? Is it best to keep them out of it? What about calling in alumni from the school experiencing trouble? Also community leaders?

(6) What about press conferences? Should they be set at the scene of trouble or away? Who should participate? Is it wise to put both sides before the cameras at the same time?

If the police are brought in, maybe they should speak for the schools? Or would it be better to have law enforcement and the administration appear together? Then how about each doing his own thing?

(7) Now speaking of the media again--and if the problem is big enough, the news men will come from everywhere--do you let them use the telephones, typewriters, etc.? Would it be a smart idea to set up a press room?

So the reporters can be near the center of things, maybe they should take over the superintendent's or principal's offices? Remember, they are on public property. How far do you go with public funds?

(8) Of course the same could hold true for those participating in the boycotts or what have you. Do you serve them doughnuts and coffee? Are they given free run of the facilities?

(9) What other services should you perform. If literature is being handed out, do you stop it, ignore it, or help the distribution?

If picket signs are set up, do you ignore them, tear them down, or find out what they say and record the information to share with the school board, media, other schools?

(10) And I mentioned earlier that these boycotts, sit-ins and the like probably will occur on public property. Does your district have printed and posted regulations as to times for closing, fire department requirements, etc.?

Maybe these are generally known by the public, your employees, or others who might create disturbances. Have you obtained legal advice?



(11) Does your local police department (or other law enforcement agencies) have a policy on how it handles demonstrations? Do you have access to these policies?

Do you have knowledge as to where you can obtain resource material related to emergency procedures--such as penal and education codes?

These are just a few questions we can now kick around. Again I want to say that I am talking only in terms of what do you do when the trouble is upon us (or when we can anticipate same). In no way am I suggesting that these so-called strategies get to the causes of these problems--sit-ins, boycotts or what have you--they don't.

This brings to mind the story about the so-called sidewalk superintendents overlooking a construction job. One day a group was gathered on the sidewalk with all heads turned upward. Above them at least ten stories was a man working on some steel girders while constructing a skyscraper. Casually he would jump from girder to girder, with only lots of space below him.

When the whistle blew at noon, and this man came down for lunch, the sidewalk watchers gathered around him. "Say," said one, "we certainly admire the way you move around on those steel beams more than 100 feet in the air. You certainly were calm and should be congratulated."

11-11-11

"How did you ever happen to get into this kind of work where a misstep could dash you to the ground?"

"Oh," said the steelworker, "I used to be in school public relations until my nerves gave out."

Sometimes I am asked to speak at retirement dinners. Recently when asked to talk to a group of retiring employees, and having no personal experience at retiring, I naturally decided to do some research and find out what it is all about. And I might say that what I learned won't help me in my job--retired life looks very good.

There are many definitions for the word retire--such as in baseball the pitcher retired the side. Or after having many blowouts I had to re-tire my car. Or I am going to retire for the night.

But the definition I liked best and actually fits anyone in school business is "To retire--the act of withdrawing from danger."

It is pretty sad that those of us in school public relations these days have to go around talking on the subject assigned to me--and to many others appearing at this seminar, I might add.

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12-12-12

It is sad because we should be talking about more positive school programs and activities. And it is saddest of all because the facts of school public relations life these days dictate that the unexpected, unrest, etc. in our schools is not unreal. This condition exists.

Like most large school districts, we have had our share of disorders in Los Angeles. These come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Believe me--all colors. No one ethnic group has a market on creating disturbances. Not one of the examples I have given so far has had any racial overtones. I was there and I know.

Back in 1965 we did have a full scale riot in the Los Angeles area--it has been commonly called the Watts riots. Now the community of Watts is only a few blocks square and these disturbances went far beyond that. Not a school or employee was touched during that hot summer in 1965, despite the fact that the National Guard and the police found it necessary to use some of our campuses for command posts.

We were very glad that no school property was damaged. Several times I wanted to say that--but thought better of it. We just didn't think it wise to ask for trouble.

Schools were to open for the fall semester about 2-3 weeks after the riots, so we went to work. We called a series of parent conferences in the community.

We enlisted the support of student leaders to help open the schools. And we took to television to welcome back the teachers and explain to the public generally that we were sensitive to the needs and problems in the community.

Meanwhile hearings on the riots started--the governor appointed a commission and the mayor appointed a commission. Everyone began taking sides. Some of us were asked to testify and my office prepared many speeches and gathered hundreds of statistics. Our appearances before the commissions were well publicized--especially the part where we told the members that the schools had suffered no damage.

You guessed it, after several days of hearings the findings were publicized--it was a toss-up between the schools and the police as to the blame for the riots. Our community relations effort, obviously, had just begun.

Since those days in 1965, we have had other problems, not exactly related to one another. Rather than discuss the causes of such disturbances, I hope in the discussion to follow that I can bring you some information on what we learned to do and not to do as far as our public relations program is concerned. And I even have brought along copies of our guidelines.

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